

# The Pagan Races of the Malay Peninsula.

By W. W. Skeat and O. Blagden.

(A REVIEW). BY H. N. RIDLEY.

As the work of civilization progresses and the forests fall before the axe of the planter, the more primitive tribes of jungle folk disappear, to be replaced by the imported and more civilized labourer from other countries; and should these old world folk themselves not actually disappear, they amalgamate with the later arrivals, and adopting their ideas and customs, they become so changed that all that is interesting about them is lost. Many tribes of the human race have thus passed away, leaving few or no relics of their ever having existed. One such race, indeed the makers and users of the stone implements known here as Batu Lintar, has vanished from the peninsula; but we have still with us that simple people commonly known as S'akais, whose manners, customs, traditions and language, have been long the study of Messrs. Skeat and Blagden, who together have published a most excellent record of the vanishing tribes of the jungle folk of the Malay Peninsula. The work in two volumes excellently illustrated by photographs and woodcuts is perhaps one of the most important of ethnological works that has appeared for some time. No trouble has been spared by the authors, both well known officials here some years ago, to collect all possible evidence on all ethnological and anthropological questions concerning these races, and the extensive list of the Bibliography of the subject shows how thorough their work has been.

The Bibliography dates from 1800, or thereabouts, and is divided up into three periods. The first two from 1800 to 1850, and thence to 1890, though giving a good many amateur's notes and some amount of research work, supplied little more than enough knowledge to stimulate research into these interesting

Jour. Straits Branch R. A. Soc., No. 49, 1907.

## 2 THE PAGAN RACES OF THE MALAY PENINSULA.

racés. The only representations of any of the tribes in those days were the rough sketches of profiles by Miklucho Maclay which were to be found in all ethnological books. Indeed till about 1890 photographs of these races were quite unprocurable in Singapore. From 1890 onwards the wild men were the subject of study by a large number of ethnologists and antropologists. Several scientific men came from Germany, and many local residents investigated the ethnology and collected specimens of their handiwork, made researches into their language, and took photographs of the people themselves, besides securing skulls and skeletons. The results of this work in which Mr. Skeat took a very large share himself, are well represented in these two volumes. One of those who devoted a great deal of time to the wild tribes was Mr. Vaughan Stevens, a very well known character here for some years, who was employed by the Berlin and St. Petersburg Missions to collect ethnographical specimens of the Sakais, and who wandered about all over the peninsula in search of them. He published voluminous accounts of his researches, on some of which considerable doubt has been thrown. The authors have made use of his work while drawing attention to inaccuracies and improbabilities in his observations and theories. The most important of the anthropologists who visited the peninsula was Herr Rudolf Martin whose monumental work "Die Inland stamme der Malayischin Halbinsel" was the first sound and reliable work on the subject.

The book commences with an introductory account of the environment of the wild man, and his character and relations to it.

The racial characters and names of the tribes and the problems of their origin are next dealt with. The three types of the tribes are the *Semangs*, negritos with woolly hairs and brachycephalic heads, the *Sakais*, dolichocephalic with wavy hair, and the southern *Jakuns*, brachycephalic and smooth haired. The relationship of the Semangs with the Andamanese and the Philippine negritos is certainly close. The Sakais are perhaps related to the Veddahs, Australians and Tamils. They vary much in skin-colour and height, and their origin must

remain at present doubtful. The Jakuns have been stated to be aboriginal Malays who refused to accept Mohammedanism and therefore fled to the interior to avoid persecution. The author points out however that they are rather a composite group of heathen Malays mixed with Semang and Sakai, and this is probably the case.

The methods of hunting, trapping and fishing, the weapons, cultivation, food, arts and crafts, social order, dealings with other races fill the first volume, which terminates with an appendix containing much important matter in measurements, color of hair, eyes, and skin and a large collection of Sakai songs chiefly collected by Mr. Skeat. Many of these are hunting songs describing the chase and capture of about all the jungle animals. Most songs end with a request to give each of the community a portion of the prey. This is a true characteristic touch of the socialism of the Sakai community. I remember once being out with some of the wild tribe of the Kuala Lumpur district near the well known caves. In the party were two men and one delightful little boy of about nine years of age clad as most of the men were in the simple costume of a strip of trap bark about as broad as a bootlace, and an armlet of fungus. While at tea we offered the child some bread and jam which he took eagerly and ran off at once to divide it with his father. When given a cigar he would not take it till he had another one for his father, showing the innate socialistic tendency of the race.

But to return to the songs after this digression. One is struck at first sight by the graphic descriptions of the habits of the animals, their appearance and cries. Some of the songs and charms too have an element of poetic feeling running through them.

In many cases the language of the Besis from whom the author has derived most of the songs and charms is a mixture of Malay and Sakai words, the meaning of some of the latter being obscure. Mr. Skeat has translated them as literally and carefully as may be, though perhaps it might have been better not to have called the Kijang, the Roedeer, or if no other translation was to be found, to have explained what the ani-

#### 4 THE PAGAN RACES OF THE MALAY PENINSULA.

mal really was, but its common name of Muntjac is fairly well known. Here and there in the songs and charms we see words and names of places of quite modern origin, such as Tanjong Pagar, Singapore, Telasih, (the Hindu Tulsi) for the Basil plant known to Malay as Selasih, and this has been commented on by one reviewer as somewhat discrediting the songs, but such innovations in folk song occur in many nations, having drifted in later perhaps than the original song was written.

A long list of names of people is given, many of which are not translated but among them are such poetic ones as Blossom, Convolvulus, Earth, Wind, Star, Butterfly, and Father of Leaf for boys, and White, Quick, Mother of Grass, Little One and Handmaid for girls.

The second volume opens with accounts of customs and beliefs. The Semangs acknowledge two deities, Kari and Ple but there seems to be no cult of these gods who are rather shadowy beings. The Sakais have a similar deity who however was probably of Malay or Arabic origin. There are however numerous demons and spirits, which are feared and have to be kept off by charms, as in all races of the world. The creation legends seem to be mainly original. In Semang and Jakun mythology man multiplied so fast, being immortal, that the earth was overcrowded, and Kari according to the Semangs slew them with his fiery breath, while according to the Jakuns, Tuan dibawah their deity turned half of them into trees. But this check on the population being insufficient death was instituted as a relief. The Jakuns appear to have anticipated the discovery of evolution in ascribing the origin of mankind to a pair of white apes, which is curious, especially in view of the fact that the ape specified, the wawa (*Hyllobates*) is generally considered the most nearly related to man of any of the apes. The charms, ceremonies, traditional sales, dances, and such subjects are fully dealt with, and the last part of the book deals with the language, the special task of Mr. Blagden, than whom it would be difficult to find a better authority. A vocabulary of the dialects is given at the end.

The amount of research which this work must have entailed has been extremely large, and the authors have spared

no pains to get together everything that has been recorded in the various journals and works on the subject of these strange races, besides adding extensively from their own observations. They have collected too a very fine series of photographs of the different races, and added many of the weapons, houses, dress, traps, and other objects, so that the whole work gives a very full and graphic view of one of the most interesting and least known of the peoples of the earth. When one looks back for a comparatively few years ago in ethnological and anthropological works to see what was known about this people, and sees what poor and often inaccurate accounts we then had, and find the only existing portraits of any of the races were Miklucho Maclay's rough sketches, one can appreciate the value of this work, and the immense labour of the authors in compiling it, and they are heartily to be congratulated on the results.

As they very pertinently point out in the introduction to the work there is great need of a thorough survey of the whole Peninsula from both a geographical and ethnological point of view by the local Governments. The Governments of French Indo-china, the Dutch Indies and the American Philippines have published and are still publishing excellent works, beautifully illustrated, on the ethnology, geography, and all branches of science of the colonies under their control. The British nation with larger, richer and more important colonies, for some reason not very clear to anyone, has practically done nothing at all for the advancement of knowledge of its vast empire. The whole of this work has been left to enthusiastic private persons who devote their time and money to such work. This apathy must be much regretted by all who have the cause of science and progress at heart.